



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Solaris by Andrei Tarkovsky

Timothy Hyman

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SOLARIS

Director: Andrei Tarkovsky. Script: Tarkovsky, based on the novel by Stanislaw Lem. Photography: Vadim Youssov.

"Our impulse to interpret a work of art . . . is exactly as imperative and fundamental as our impulse to interpret the universe by metaphysics."

—T. S. Eliot, in his introduction to Wilson Knight's *The Wheel of Fire*.

Solaris was the first of Tarkovsky's films to be seen at all widely in the West and, perhaps inevitably, it was misunderstood. Audiences and almost all critics brought to it the most conventional expectations—of a genre film, a sci-fi epic, "Russia's answer to 2001." And although it clearly owes part of its continuing availability to this science-fiction label, *Solaris* has never, I suspect, found the wider audience it deserves.

I want to present *Solaris* here not as science-fiction but as prophetic vision. It was of course based on a science-fiction source, but a reading of Stanislaw Lem's novel reveals Tarkovsky's entirely different intentions. Crucial is the film's new ending, with Kris's return and submission to his father. The space journey of Lem's novel is now enclosed, as a kind of dream-core, within the sequences of earth; and the planet *Solaris* becomes, as I hope to show, essentially a metaphysical dimension, the location of an oceanic love. Space fantasy has become moral allegory; Tarkovsky is clearly speaking in *Solaris* about our life, today; all that happens in space is intended only to return us to earth.

The film's most memorable sequences—the garden, the drive through the city, the bonfire film, the Hunters in the Snow, the ending—bear no relation to anything in the novel; they are entirely personal to Tarkovsky's vision, and it is these visionary sequences that will determine my approach to the film. What follows is not so much criticism as "interpretation"; in Wilson Knight's phrase, a "reconstruction of vision," rather than a judgment. But *Solaris* demands exigesis partly because it is full of ambiguities. Stylistically, it can easily be grouped with the cinema of Resnais

and his circle, with *Je t'aime Je t'aime*, or with Chris Marker's *Le Jetée*. Tarkovsky has spoken of the film-maker having as his basic material a block of time, into which he carves, as the sculptor into stone;* and this potentiality of film to shape time is particularly relevant to the theme of *Solaris*: a man has to relive the past in order to return to the present. In *Solaris*, as so often in Resnais also, we are plunged into the middle of a complex story, and the information necessary to understand it on a rational level is only slowly divulged. There is a many-layered structure, of films-within-the-film. We do not immediately recognize Burton as he watches his much younger self on television; nor the younger variants of Kris's parents, or of Kris himself, in the Bonfire Film, with its bewildering telescoping of Kris's life from childhood to marriage. Gabaryan we meet only after death, in the suicide cassette he records for Kris. Each of these is a key sequence in terms of information or "background," but in each, cinema's ability to present the past as the present is felt as undermining temporal reality. A further disorientating factor—especially during the sequence of Kris's fever—is Tarkovsky's interpolation of black and white and color. But within this world, Hari's presence is both more meaningful and more acceptable. We first see her in a photograph, and when she appears on *Solaris*, she clearly is the photographic image (imperfectly) "copied." Unlike Burton or Kris's parents, however, she is quite unchanged by, because outside, time.

All this takes a lot of unravelling, but in both Tarkovsky and Resnais, there is a serious intent; the essence of this kind of film is that the spectator should be forced to undergo a confrontation with mystery, to acknowledge the uncharted. But where I think Tarkovsky is so different from Resnais is in his going beyond the mystery to a moralistic end. *Solaris* is not another *Marienbad*, about the mysteries of love in Time: nor is it, as some have thought, about the illusiveness of love, (so that Kris never returns to earth at all, but is marooned in the mirror

*This and subsequent quotations are translated from Andrei Rublev, Paris: Editions Francais Reunis, 1970

world of Solaris's ocean). In the final image of *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, the film's political and ideological overtones become clear. While the film is not precisely anti-Soviet (Tarkovsky gives some of the principal characters English names, and he has Burton drive through Tokyo's freeways) yet it is clearly anti-materialistic. In Kris's return to his father's garden are implied many of the radical perspectives familiar to us in the west, though I cannot think of any significant earlier film that has embodied such protests, set as they are here within a deeply felt metaphysic. What Tarkovsky is surely saying at the end of *Solaris*, is that love carries with it the imperative to change society, to build a very different society than our own.

The film begins on Kris Kelvin's last day on earth, before setting off for Solaris. A terrible sadness is felt from these first sequences, in the film's numbed pace, its wavering, disturbing slowness. At first I think most audiences must assume this sadness reflects Kris's regret at leaving earth. Later however we will piece together Kris's earlier history: the mother to whom he was too much attached, the marriage she resented, his abandoning it, the young wife's suicide. All this has happened years before, but it has left Kris vanquished and without hope.

Yet Kris's predicament is soon seen to be representative of society as a whole. *Solaris* is centrally a prophecy; it is about a society which has lost humanity and which has, or soon will, come to the end of its tether. The landscape of these first sequences spells out a polarity, between garden and city, organic and inorganic, humanistic and anti-humanistic, which is obviously central to Tarkovsky's thought. Kris's father inhabits an anachronistic world, of protest and nostalgia for the past ("I dislike innovation") with a horse in the garage, the car beside it half-covered with hay, and a gas balloon moored to the roof. Yet directly beside the garden runs the highway, which will lead eventually to the terrible city of Burton's drive, a world with no human organic thing visible.

It is with this mechanical world of hardware and radiation that Kris, although a psychologist, is at first identified; as his father rebukes him,

"Earth has adapted itself to men like you, but at a heavy price." Yet in the film's mysterious opening sequence, as Kris stares down at plants slowly waving underwater, is already a foretaste of that "contact with the ocean" by which Kris will be redeemed, and which will entail involvement with all that is most soft, fluid, and in a cultural sense, primitive.

If the first part of the film is essentially about society, in the second we focus almost exclusively on the individual experience of Kris. Indeed the whole story of *Solaris* has unmistakably the air of an inner adventure, a dream-sequence or a psychoanalytic exploration. The planet Solaris offers a kind of purgation; it becomes an inner dimension in which Kris, through Hari, is made to relive the experience which had brutalized him on Earth, to become once more compassionate, ready to return. The planet and its ocean can well be seen as one of many archetypal islands, familiar to us from myth and literature.* On Solaris, as on the island of *The Tempest*, men "of great guilt" are forced to confront the specters of their past, and so, each one, to discover himself, "When no man was his own." For Kris, as for Prospero, the ocean is the agent of catharsis, of cleansing, and so of his release. And when the process is at an end, Kris must return to take up his role on earth, as Prospero his dukedom.

"Though the seas threaten, they are merciful." Something of Kris's sea-change the spectator is made to share also. For us, as for Kris, it is the transformation of our initial fear of the ocean, first into a sense of absurdity, of the impotence of man in the face of such a power, and then eventually into love, that constitutes the true narrative of the film. The ocean presents itself throughout as some overwhelming existential problem, which we have to come to terms with, to interpret. In the earlier sequences, where the camera will frequently pass out through windows into the blankness beyond, the ocean is experienced as a void, a threat the greater for being

*I am grateful to Mr. R. Farrington for pointing out the remarkable parallels between the imagery of *Solaris* and that of Marvell's *The Garden*.

unspecific. Then, when Kris's dead wife appears, she is the materialization of his guilt; as Gabaryan had warned, the ocean "has something to do with one's conscience." And so long as she is no more to Kris than a threat to be destroyed, Hari retains her own sense of incompleteness, her obsessive fear of abandonment.

With Hari's reappearance, however, the whole character of the film changes. The ocean now begins to be seen as the source, not of ghosts, but of love. At this point Kris begins his return back towards society. What his growing love for Hari will reveal to him is the validity of his father's humanistic—and socially divergent—viewpoint, for which Tarkovsky has provided a complex cultural reference. We had noticed a copy of Don Quixote open in Kris's father's study; and now, in the space-station's library, Cervantes is again read from, (with Snouth as Sancho Panza to Kris's gallant madman). On one wall, moreover are large transparencies of Brueghel's *Seasons*, and in front of one of these, "The Hunters in the Snow," *Solaris's* most remarkable sequence will take place. Kris has left Hari alone in the library, to escort the drunken Snouth to his room; now he anxiously returns, only to find her staring absorbed in front of the picture. Magically, she is *in* the landscape, and for some moments we explore it with her; the skaters and the homesteads below, the birds and trees silhouetted against the sky, the men and their dogs as they move across the brow of the hill. When she turns to Kris, we realize that through Brueghel she has been able to apprehend what it is to be a human being on earth. In the cessation of gravity that follows, we watch Hari and Kris as they float

together in mid-air, in front of the Brueghel, while around them slowly circles the Cervantes, with Don Quixote riding forth. This sequence must be seen as Tarkovsky's cultural testament. Cervantes and Brueghel are both felt as representative of a humanistic culture that is earthy and realistic, yet transcends naturalism, even as love transcends the weight of matter, and for Kris, redeems the past.

Kris's love for Hari restores him to humanity; but the continuing failure of their relationship opens up for him terrifying vistas of a love that goes beyond any individual. We sense his growing realization that Hari is not the victim of the ocean, "that custard," but a part of it. These sequences culminate in a kind of breakdown, at the onset of which, speaking half-intelligibly to Snouth, Kris outlines the core of the film's speculation. "Maybe we're here," he suggests, "to sense man as an object for love." He speaks of Tolstoy's shame at his inability to love all mankind. "... Shame, that is what will save mankind."

In the fever-sequence that follows, Hari and his mother merge and proliferate; and when Kris wakes, it is to learn that Hari and the other "guests" have disappeared. Kris's role is now clear. "Contact" with the ocean has been established. "It is time," says Snouth, standing at Kris's bedside, "to return to earth."

Clearly the central part of the film has been, on one level, about a man's discovery of what love is. But love is here viewed as a dimension both cosmic and metaphysical; and so Tarkovsky clothes his dialectical progression in a space allegory. The ocean is the "void" of undifferentiated experience, the matrix from which all experience comes. Kris's love for Hari issues from and returns to this void, and only by confronting and accepting it will its threat be transformed to beneficence. At the end of the film, the ocean is found to be the ground of being, and in the final shot the living presence of a metaphysical reality is affirmed.

The last scenes on earth begin with Kris once again lingering by the lake, staring into the vegetable life in the watery depths—images that

Hari after another "death": SOLARIS



now take on a much more explicit meaning. We watch Kris with foreboding as he comforts the dog, walks over to the house, presses his face against the window—a face of appalling compassion, as he watches his father, apparently crazed with grief, standing helplessly as water drips onto him from above.

But his father's sudden joy as he recognizes him, and Kris's wonderful gesture at the threshold, define this ending as one of hope. When Kris returns to earth, it is to kneel before his father in an image of submission exactly echoing the great Rembrandt in Leningrad, "*The Return of the Prodigal Son*." Kris has "returned to his father's house," and so, implicitly, to the anti-materialist and divergent view his father embodies. He shares with him not only the grief of a terrible human loss—for each has lost his wife since they last met—but also a common anchorage in a transcendent love. When we left *Solaris*, our last image was of the plant Kris had brought from earth, flourishing on the window sill. "Once earth was beyond the reach of love" . . . And now, as the camera rises from the kneeling figure and above the house, we see that the earthly garden is indeed fully located in the ocean; and from this contact, a new society will be born.

Despite their scale, both *Solaris* and *Andrei Rublev* are very personal films. Each seems to take a panoramic view, to include the whole world, but each is in fact about the effect of that world on one character only. As Tarkovsky explained just before starting work on *Solaris*: "In all that I have done, in all that I intend to do . . . my theme is this: a man gripped by an ideal searches passionately for the answer to a question, goes to the limit in his attempt to understand reality. And he obtains this understanding, thanks to his strivings, to his experience."

The films have similar formal structures. Tarkovsky has made clear that he rejects for himself the dynamic juxtapositions of Eisenstein, in favor of building one sequence upon another, until in one last conclusive image the overall meaning of the film is made clear. In both *Rublev* and *Solaris* this final sequence is all-important in providing

the affirmation Tarkovsky seeks, of "that optimism to which I hold so firmly, and about which I am constantly speaking." Yet in *Rublev* this ending may be felt to have a certain hollowness about it. Throughout the film appallingly violent episodes have been presented to us in a strangely distanced perspective; it is only in the final minutes that the film suddenly becomes emotionally full-blooded, and is allowed to move at last into color, into the warmth, tenderness and refinement of Rublev's ikons. However much we may agree with the film's argument—that spiritual values and artistic achievement come out of and redeem the brutality of experience—yet I am not sure this ending makes out a convincing case. I think a comparison with the Brueghel sequence in *Solaris* is revealing. Both sequences are an attempt to use a great work of art as a means of transcendence. But whereas, in *Rublev*, this transcendence is juxtaposed to the rest of the film, in *Solaris* it is situated at the heart of it, and Brueghel's affirmation of the natural world is embodied within the dramatic context, of Hari becoming human. It makes a very different sense to pan and zoom into Brueghel's illusionistic landscape than into the flaking color areas of a Rublev ikon; and I think it is the difference between the humanistic and the merely aestheticizing.

There are aspects of both these films that are difficult, but these difficulties are common to most significant European cinema of the last decade. As film-makers have emerged as great artists, they have inherited the same problems as the painters of the previous generation; and they have paid the same price. Even the once-loyal "serious" audiences have turned away, and above all, to the Hollywood of the thirties and forties; and I think the common factor in their choice of naivete or mediocrity in preference to obvious artistic mastery is the disturbing subjectivity of this recent cinema, its apparently dissociated, futile inwardness.

Yet a positive view of the recent work of (for example) Bergman, Resnais, Antonioni, Fellini, Pasolini, and Bresson would be to see them as attempting to forge a metaphysical cinema, whose inclusion of the mystical and the miraculous often

recalls the "World-Theater" of the past. Before the advent of cinema, the stage had to be the vehicle for the cosmic flights of such works as *Everyman* or *The Tempest*, *The Magic Flute* or *Faust* or *Peer Gynt*. But in cinema, the "rough magic" of masque and opera can become infinitely more resourceful. And these recent films do seem to me to have greatly expanded cinema's potentiality—through its magical inclusiveness they have conveyed the scope and spectacle of life, while at the same time, chiefly through temporal ambiguities, they have given this spectacle a subjective edge, so that we sense the director's personal and mysterious experience. In its approximation to dream and to our mental processes, in its capacity to manipulate space and time without losing verisimilitude, film surely can uniquely embody this kind of vision.

In many respects Tarkovsky does belong within this new personal cinema of dream and reverie, fantasy and metaphysic. He shares with these others an interest in psychoanalysis, a use of almost self-conscious "archetypes" (the images of horses, rushing streams, and figures standing under rain or pouring water repeated in both

films). And he is, even more than they, a master of the "Bead-Game" of cultural reference. Yet there is a real difference. Like Kris's father in *Solaris*, Tarkovsky "dislikes innovation." What gave him "more pleasure than anything else" in *Rublev's* French reviews were the words "without breaking with tradition." His purpose, he says, is not to experiment, but to make "important" films.

We should not confuse such utterances with official Soviet attitudes to Western decadence. I think Tarkovsky means only that he remains committed to an art that puts content before form. And his films do in some respects stand as a corrective. Unlike that of his Western contemporaries, Tarkovsky's is a vision informed by an urgent moral content—a vision we can all share. "Dream," wrote Jane Harrison, "is the myth of the individual; myth, the dream of the collective." It is Tarkovsky's ability to project, through cinema's unique potentialities, a very inward vision, in such a way that it becomes a collective statement—a myth for our whole society—that makes *Solaris* likely to prove the "important" film its director hoped for.

—TIMOTHY HYMAN

Controversy and Correspondence

JOHN FORD:

Assessing the Reassessment

Michael Dempsey's ostensible reassessment of John Ford, actually little more than an attempt to revive the shibboleths of pre-*Sequence* criticism, is subverted by its occasionally sloppy film scholarship and utterly undone by its resulting proclivity to mistake assertion for evidence. This is particularly unfortunate since the issues it raises, while not amenable to facile polemics, do raise interesting questions about the nature of Ford's artistry. But how seriously can we take the conclusions of an article that fails even to get its facts straight, as if simple description exceeded the limits of its intellectual competence? In the space of four paragraphs Dempsey's fertile critical imagination performs the following feats of creative description: a Veterans' Day Parade in *Judge Priest* becomes a spontaneous celebration of the outcome of an election that has not yet taken place; General Fairfield of *The Sun Shines Bright* becomes the

lover of his son's mistress, the father of his own granddaughter; in the same film, Ashby Corwin solemnly declares himself a sinner, though his actual prayer, "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, Look upon a little child, Pity her simplicity, Suffer her to come to Thee" clearly refers to a dead woman, and the childishness of the words even hints at something other than unambiguous solemnity. While each of these mistakes, in isolation, seems trivial, the pattern of their frequent recurrence is significant, indicative of careless film viewing, oriented more toward accumulating "evidence" than gaining critical insights. In any case, it is not surprising that, after these abortive attempts to discuss individual films, the article beats a strategic retreat, comes to rely increasingly on peremptory judgments, "self-evident" arguments whose pristine purity exists beyond contamination by mere facts, whose logical clarity transcends specific films.

Given the quality of the film scholarship in the article, this inclination to formulate and discuss myths, while overlooking inconvenient facts, is tactically pru-